

Robert L. Bernstein, Publisher and Champion of Dissent, Dies at 96

By Robert D. McFadden

May 27, 2019

Robert L. Bernstein, who built Random House into an international publishing giant and championed political dissent, freedom of expression and relief for oppressed peoples as the founder of Human Rights Watch, died on Monday in Manhattan. He was 96.

Mr. Bernstein's son Peter confirmed the death, at a hospital.

The worlds of publishing and human rights frequently overlapped during the Cold War and an era of repressive regimes that censored, imprisoned and exiled dissidents, and Mr. Bernstein — a man of eclectic tastes with a passion for good books and noble causes — resided comfortably in both.

As the head of Random House from 1966 to 1990, he published a host of American authors, including James A. Michener, Toni Morrison, William Styron, Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal, E. L. Doctorow and Robert Ludlum. He also published the Soviet dissidents Andrei D. Sakharov, Yelena G. Bonner and Arkady N. Shevchenko; the Argentine journalist Jacobo Timerman, and the Czech writer-revolutionary Václav Havel.

Random House under Mr. Bernstein, who personally approved all major acquisitions, became the world's largest publisher of general interest books, known as trade books. Revenues grew from \$40 million to \$850 million annually, and the flagship acquired many of America's best-known publishing houses, including the Crown Group, Vintage, Ballantine, Fawcett and Schocken.

Mr. Bernstein hardly looked like one of the most combative and powerful men in the industry. He was a tall, rosy-cheeked patrician with a soft voice and a gentle manner that harmonized with his booklined office and the small gossip world of publishing luncheons. His Random House, by all accounts, was a collegial, congenial workplace, full of talented, laid-back editors who, like the boss, seemed to be signed on for life.

But in November 1989, after a decade of consolidation and dwindling profits in the publishing industry, Mr. Bernstein was ousted by S.I. Newhouse Jr., whose family owned the publishing empire that had bought Random House in 1980. He was succeeded on Jan. 3, 1990, by Alberto Vitale, the president and chief executive of Bantam Doubleday Dell.

Industry analysts said Mr. Bernstein had been removed because Random House, despite its huge revenue stream, was worried about shrinking profit margins. Mr. Bernstein, the Harvard-educated protégé and successor of Random House's co-founder Bennett Cerf, did not dispute the analysts. While it was owned by a conglomerate, they said, the company was run like a quirky little bookshop, with a proprietor who loved books, but did not focus on profits. It published many books that had scant commercial prospects, but that were considered important by editors.

In 1991, Mr. Bernstein took the title of publisher at large of John Wiley & Sons. It specialized in professional books, textbooks, technical books and journals. He also devoted far more time to the human rights activities that had increasingly become his second life since the 1970s.

For years he had traveled widely to investigate and expose rights abuses, lobbied governments, raised funds and led fights against the repression of writers in the Soviet Union and other countries. Starting in 1978, he had also founded rights-monitoring groups — Helsinki Watch, Americas Watch, Asia Watch and others — that were merged in 1988 into Human Rights Watch.

With Mr. Bernstein as founding chairman, Human Rights Watch and its constituent groups established a global presence, exposing genocide, torture and war crimes in Africa and Central America, and political corruption, criminal justice violations, racial and gender discrimination, and other abuses in many lands. He retired in 1998 after 20 years at the helm.

But in a 2009 Op-Ed article in The New York Times, Mr. Bernstein accused Human Rights Watch of anti-Israeli bias, saying it condemned “far more” human rights abuses in Israel than in other Middle Eastern countries ruled by “authoritarian regimes with appalling human rights records.”

Human Rights Watch rejected the criticisms as inaccurate and said it stood behind its work.

The group and Mr. Bernstein ultimately reconciled. Robert Kissane, the co-chairman of the Human Rights Watch board, wrote in an email on Tuesday, “We were honored to have Bob at our annual dinner in New York this year, and to pay tribute to his contributions over 40 years to human rights around the world.”

Robert Louis Bernstein was born in Manhattan on Jan. 5, 1923, one of two children of Alfred and Sylvia (Bloch) Bernstein. His father was in the textile business. The boy attended the Lincoln School, a progressive affiliate of Columbia University, graduating in 1940. At Harvard, he completed work for a degree in history in two and a half years, although he did not receive his degree until 1944. He served in the Army Air Forces from 1943 to 1946.

In 1950, he married Helen Walter, and she survives him. In addition to her and his son Peter, he is survived by two other sons, Tom and William; his sister, Barbara Rosenberg; 10 grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren.

After the war, Mr. Bernstein became an office boy with the Simon & Schuster publishing house, and by 1952 he was general sales manager. Four years later he was dismissed in a staff cutback, but Mr. Cerf soon hired him as a sales manager at Random House. Founded in 1927, the storied RH had published works by Eugene O'Neill, William Faulkner, Marcel Proust, Sinclair Lewis, Robert Penn Warren and James Joyce's “Ulysses.” In 1960, it acquired the distinguished Alfred A. Knopf, whose imprint went on many celebrated books of the Bernstein era.

Mr. Bernstein succeeded Mr. Cerf as president in 1966, became chief executive in 1967 and was named chairman in 1975. With a mandate to expand, he bought other publishers, enlarged fiction and nonfiction lists, published dictionaries and encyclopedias, added new textbooks and introduced books on tape, educational games and audiovisual aids for schools. He also published scores of Nobel- and Pulitzer Prize-winning authors.

Mr. Bernstein and Knopf went to court in 1974 to fight a federal effort to censor “The C.I.A. and the Cult of Intelligence,” an exposé by two former officials, Victor L. Marchetti and John D. Marks. Many parts were ultimately censored, but Knopf published the book with blanks for censored passages and boldface type for passages that survived censorship. It became a critically acclaimed best seller.

As his human rights involvement grew, Mr. Bernstein led several organizations to aid dissidents whose works were suppressed in their homelands. In Moscow, he met Mr. Sakharov, the physicist instrumental in developing the Soviet hydrogen bomb, and his wife, Ms. Bonner. In 1975, Mr. Bernstein went to Oslo to hear Ms. Bonner accept the Nobel Peace Prize for her husband, who had been barred by Moscow from attending.

In the 1980s, Knopf published several books by Mr. Sakharov; memoirs of Ms. Bonner and the dissident Anatoly Shcharansky, who served nine years in prisons and labor camps; and works by Mr. Shevchenko, the Soviet defector, and Mr. Timerman, who wrote of being tortured by Argentina’s military regime.

Mr. Bernstein went to Nicaragua in 1985 to investigate charges by Americas Watch that American-backed contra forces fighting the leftist Sandinista government had committed atrocities against unarmed civilians. The Reagan Administration said Americas Watch had been politicized, but Mr. Bernstein insisted that all the watch groups were nonpolitical advocates for victims of oppression.

In 1988, Random House published the hardcover edition of Mr. Havel’s “Letters to Olga,” 144 social and political commentaries that had been disguised as letters to his wife to get past censors during his imprisonment from 1979 to 1983 for human rights activities. A year after its publication, as Soviet-East European Communism crumbled, Mr. Havel became president of Czechoslovakia.

Mr. Bernstein had homes in Manhattan and Bedford, N.Y. His memoir, “Speaking Freely: My Life in Publishing and Human Rights,” written with Doug Merlino, appeared in 2016.

Law school fellowships on human rights in Mr. Bernstein’s name were established at Yale and New York University. In later years, he lectured widely and campaigned for human rights in China. And in 2011, he established a new group, Advancing Human Rights, and became its chairman.

“I never imagined that at 88 years old I would be founding a new human rights organization,” he said, “but I am doing it out of necessity, because I believe there are trends which are doing great damage to democracies throughout the world.”

A version of this article appears in print on May 28, 2019, on Page A24 of the New York edition with the headline: Robert L. Bernstein, Publisher Who Championed Human Rights, Dies at 96